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TAGS: [FR](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH SHARE VIEWS ON LEBANON CONFERENCE, UNSCR  
1701 IMPLEMENTATION

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: EB PDAS Liz Dibble and NEA DAS Robert Danin met with the MFA's Herve Besancenot (DAS-equivalent for the Levant) and the Elysee's Dominique Boche (Chirac's Middle East advisor) on January 9 to discuss preparations for the January 25 Lebanon conference (septel to follow) and options for tightening implementation of UNSCR 1701. The French claimed to be confident that Hizballah had not succeeded in rearming south of the Litani, but were cautious about the prospect of UNIFIL launching UAV operations in light of Hizballah's declaration that such operations would cross a red line. Besancenot indicated that France was inclined to accept a delay in establishing the international tribunal until such time as Brammertz was prepared to name names. Both men suggested it might be useful to "call Syria's bluff" by allowing the Italians to run with their ideas on providing technical assistance on border monitoring to the SARG. Likewise, they both displayed interest in the possibility of establishing a UNSCR 1701 Embargo Committee in New York. Boche argued that Sheba Farms remained "the best political trap" for Hizballah. End summary.

Moving Forward on UNSCR 1701  
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12. (S) EB PDAS Liz Dibble and NEA DAS Robert Danin met with Herve Besancenot, MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant, on January 9, to discuss preparations for the January 25 Lebanon conference (septel to follow) and options for tightening implementation of UNSCR 1701. They raised the same topics in a separate meeting later that day with Dominique Boche, President Chirac's Middle East advisor.

13. (S) Danin, citing Washington's concern that Hizballah is rearming, stressed the need to strengthen implementation of UNSCR 1701. He said that PM Siniora, though receptive in theory to enhancing the arms embargo regime, was not proactive and seemed reluctant to accept that changes (i.e., rearmament) were taking place on the ground. He noted that Israel shared the U.S. assessment, which was discussed during the recent visit to Washington by Major General Amos Yadlin, the head of IDF Military Intelligence.

French See Hizballah Checked South of Litani  
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14. (S) Besancenot agreed that there had been a slowdown in the implementation of UNSCR 1701, but said he had seen no proof of Hizballah's rearming, despite Israel's claims. While he conceded that some significant rearmament may have

taken place north of the Litani river (including the possibility that missile parts may have been smuggled over the Syrian-Lebanese border), he said no significant rearmament had taken place south of the Litani due to the LAF/UNIFIL presence. For his part, Boche said the French were aware of the risk of Hizballah rearming, but balanced that against the fact that Hizballah fighters had effectively been pushed out of the area south of the Litani, which meant that cross-border raids of the type that triggered last summer's conflict were no longer possible. (Later, on the margins of the Paris III prep meeting (septel) Siniora advisor Mohammed Chatah said that the PM believed Hizballah was shipping arms from south Lebanon to north of the Litani.)

#### Drones: French Spooked by Hizballah Threat

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15. (S) Danin asked for current French views on adding an aerial dimension to UNIFIL's mandate (i.e., "AirUNIFIL"), saying he understood that French UAVs in Lebanon remained in their crates because PM Siniora was not prepared to ask for their deployment. He noted the need to encourage Siniora to do so, adding that the Secretary was personally concerned about the reports of Hizballah's rearmament.

16. (S) Besancenot confirmed that the French UAVs had not been unpacked due to the "sensitivity" of their deployment. He indicated that if a decision were made to move forward, the GoF would agree with UNIFIL to only operate the drones in certain areas (presumably, not beyond UNIFIL's AOR). However, he observed that: "Drones are useful, but we have to consider the security consequences for our troops." Lebanon desk officer Remy Bouallegue chimed in: "Given the negative reaction from Hizballah, we're being very cautious . . . we

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think now may not be the best time" (to begin UAV flights).

17. (S) Boche agreed that France was prepared to make drones available to UNIFIL, but was clearly spooked by reports that Hizballah's D/SYG had recently announced that any drone flights would cross a "red line." "This is difficult for us because we have troops on the ground," Boche said apologetically. Danin acknowledged that the vulnerability of French peacekeepers was a legitimate concern, but pressed Boche not to let Hizballah exercise a veto over UNIFIL operations. He pointed out that UNIFIL had already expanded its UNSCR 1701 mandate by adding a naval dimension to the arms embargo; an aerial expansion could be justified by the same logic. Boche remained unconvinced, saying that Hizballah's warning had been very specific. "We must consider it," he said.

18. (S) Both Boche and Besancenot made it clear that, in the event UNIFIL did begin operating UAVs, they were under no illusion that Israel would suspend its overflights of Lebanese territory. However, they noted appreciatively that Israel had made some progress in curbing the most irksome (and to Siniora, politically damaging) overflights, and hoped that Israel might be able to further limit its overflight activities as its confidence in UNIFIL's performance grew. Boche made it clear, however, that the French did not envision a tit-for-tat trade of UAV-generated intel in exchange for fewer overflights. "Our purpose is to beef up UNIFIL's intelligence capabilities, not necessarily to provide intelligence to Israel," he said.

#### "Taking a Pause" on International Tribunal

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19. (S) Turning to options for establishing the International Tribunal for Lebanon, Besancenot said that France was inclined to "take a pause" in pressing for the tribunal's establishment. Noting that the last Brammertz report was rather anodyne, he questioned whether it made sense for

Siniora's government to "got to war" with the opposition until such time that Brammertz was prepared to name names. Danin suggested that France join the U.S. in pushing for Brammertz's extension, and said that Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's proposal for a six-person committee to review tribunal documents that had already been approved by the Siniora Cabinet was a step in the wrong direction. "It depends on the purpose of the committee," said Besancenot, who agreed that any major changes to the tribunal documents would be unacceptable, while indicating that France would not object to minor fiddles that might help the March 8 opposition to save face. Besancenot said he did not know when Amr Moussa planned to return to Beirut, but said France continued to act as if the Amr Moussa plan were still on the table.

#### Border Monitors: Paris Willing to Call Syria's Bluff

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¶10. (S) Asked about possibilities for monitoring the Lebanese-Syrian border, Besancenot saw little scope for beefing up monitoring on the Lebanese side of the border in light of Syrian threats. "Siniora is against it because Syria won't accept it," he summarized. Besancenot seemed surprised when Danin suggested that Siniora might reconsider were there to be monitors on both sides of the border. "If Siniora has changed his mind, we'll try to help," he said.

¶11. (S) Boche and Besancenot each stressed their continuing conviction that there is nothing to be gained at present by talking to the Syrian regime, which "pockets" any international engagement it can get without changing its own behavior. However, both suggested that France might be prepared to "call Syria's bluff" by encouraging the Italians to move forward with their offer to provide border-monitoring assistance to the SARG. If the Syrians refused to seriously engage with the Italians, then perhaps other EU states would finally realize the futility of extending carrots to the Asad regime. (Boche predicted that the Syrians would likely accept whatever hi-tech border monitoring gear the Italians offered to provide, but would send the Italian experts packing as soon as Syrian forces had learned to use the new equipment.) On the other hand, if the Syrians accepted Italian cooperation, it would undermine the regime's argument that the GOL is not entitled to international assistance for the same purpose. Both Besancenot and Boche emphasized that, whatever the Italians or other EU states might do, France

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would not enter into negotiations with the Syrian regime.

¶12. (S) Neither Boche nor Besancenot warmed to Danin's suggestion of an EU announcement that Syria's EU association agreement was on hold. "Very difficult -- we're a bit isolated on this question," Besancenot said dryly. Boche suggested it was immaterial, since the association agreement could only move forward on the basis of unanimity and France would continue to quietly block any progress. Dibble pressed Boche, suggesting that a more high-profile declaratory policy on this point might help the Syrian public to recognize that it was missing out on tangible benefits due to the Asad regime's behavior. Boche dodged the point. As for discouraging Gulf States from investing in Syria (particularly in Syria's heated real estate sector) Besancenot said the idea was interesting, but would bump up against the fact that most Gulf States -- including, in his view, even Saudi Arabia -- did not want to see the Syrian regime toppled.

#### French Open to Embargo Committee Idea

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¶13. (S) Both French officials were somewhat more open to the idea of establishing an Embargo Committee to oversee implementation of UNSCR 1701, as well as to the prospect of

calling upon UN member states to report on their efforts to enforce the embargo.

#### Sheba Farms the "Best Trap" for Hizballah

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¶14. (S) Boche expressed hope that UN SYG Ban Ki-moon would quickly restore momentum to the UN's engagement on 1701 implementation, especially on the question of delineating the Syrian-Lebanese border in order to lay the groundwork for a resolution of the Sheba Farms question. Boche acknowledged that the Israeli government was in no position at present to seriously consider an initiative on the Sheba Farms (which might be seen as rewarding Hizballah for its aggression), but insisted that at some point Hizballah had to be deprived of the Sheba Farms pretext for attacking Israel. "Sheba is still the best political trap for Hizballah," said Boche.

#### Israel-Syria

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¶15. (S) Boche observed that the task of isolating Syria has not been made easier by voices in both the United States and Israel which are calling for engagement with Damascus. He said he understood how difficult it was for an Israeli politician to appear unwilling to explore the possibility of an opening with Damascus, but noted approvingly that Israeli PM Olmert, at least, seemed unmoved by Syria's gamesmanship.

#### Israel-Palestine

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¶16. (S) Boche ended by asking Danin for his analysis of PM Mahmoud Abbas' call for early parliamentary elections. Boche said Abbas was making a "very risky wager" because if Hamas won the election, Abbas would be finished politically. "Our fear," Boche confessed, "is that he'll lose control of Gaza, and instead of one (de facto) Palestinian state, there will be two." He said the French continue to hope that Abbas will reach an understanding with Hamas and thus avoid further confrontation.

#### Comment

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¶17. (S) We were struck by the extent to which the French seemed paralyzed by Hizballah's latest implied threat. While the French may not have had time to completely digest this latest development, the implication -- that Hizballah can exercise veto power over UNIFIL by declaring the existence of red lines -- is deeply worrisome. No less troublesome is the notion of "taking a pause" with respect to establishing the international tribunal, which would seem to play into the Syrian/opposition strategy of running down the clock until President Chirac leaves office. In short, while the French remain indispensable allies on questions involving Lebanon and Syria, their thinking reflects the unresolved tension between their aspiration to maximize support to PM Siniora and his allies on the one hand, and their determination to minimize risks to their peacekeepers on the other.

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¶18. (U) EB PDAS Liz Dibble and NEA DAS Robert Danin cleared this cable.

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